Articles

PHILIP DEVINE, "THE MORAL BASIS OF VEGETARIANISM," PHILOSOPHY 53, pp. 481-505.

Once upon a time, not too long ago (1978), Philip Devine wrote a fable in which he tried to undermine two plausible defenses of vegetarianism: the utilitarian, according to which eating animals is wrong because of the animal pain required to produce the meat; and a position which condemns the killing of animals because it is killing. Devine concluded his fable with a defense of speciesism. In this paper I will first examine Devine's discussion of utilitarianism as a basis of vegetarianism, and then turn to his own defense of speciesism. Since I hope to show that Devine has badly misapplied utilitarianism, there is no need to focus on his discussion of the wrongness of killing.

Devine's primary goal is to undermine the following utilitarian defense of vegetarianism: "killing and rearing animals for food causes more pain than it causes us pleasure," and so "the practice is for that reason morally objectionable" (485). In criticizing the utilitarian argument Devine assumes "that animals are capable of suffering pain, and do in fact suffer pain in being reared and slaughtered for food" (485). But because "animal experience is so lacking in intensity that the pains of animals are overridden by the pleasures experienced by human beings" (491), Devine rejects the utilitarian's crucial calculation that "animals suffer more pain in being killed and reared for food than human beings enjoy pleasure in eating flesh" (485).

Devine offers two reasons for thinking that animal suffering lacks the requisite intensity. First, since animals are "incapable of telling [us] that they are in pain, as distinct from (say) moaning... [this] may well justify ascribing to them pains of much less intensity than those we ascribe to human beings" (486). Second, since humans can intellectualize about pain, "animal pain is conceptually defective" and "there seems no good reason to resist transposing [this conceptual defectiveness] into lack of intensity" (486). Devine also says he can make the same point in a different way. Since "pain involves elements both of emotion and sensation... it is highly plausible to maintain that non-human animals--even supposing that they experience pain as a sensation as intensely as humans do--experience far less suffering" (486). In short, animal suffering has a "lesser conceptual richness. A cow may experience some distress at losing her calf, but it makes little sense to speak of her grief" (486).

The inability to talk is not related in any way to an inability to experience intense pain (if that is part of Devine's argument). Nor would the lack of an ability to conceptualize, in Devine's narrow sense of verbalize, show that animals cannot experience emotions. Animals can perceive, recognize, remember, figure out how to do things--abilities which are sufficient to guarantee that animals will have, in addition to sensations, emotions,[1] unless Devine makes it definitionally true that to be able to experience an emotion an entity must be able to verbalize. Such a reply would, besides begging a crucial question, conflict with an overwhelming amount of evidence that animals do experience emotions, including the only one Devine mentions, grief.[2]

Perhaps, of course, Devine has in mind the epistemological relationship between the ability of an animal to talk and our ability to know whether, or how much, it is suffering. But if there is a problem about knowing who or what besides me experiences pain, this problem will not allow anyone to pretend that whether, or how much, a creature suffers is resolved by discovering that it utters statements like 'It hurts.' Whatever deep difficulties may arise in using moans and writhings as criteria for saying that another creature suffers will also arise for using language as such a criterion: that some creatures can replace a scream of pain with an utterance using the word 'pain' alters neither our ascription of pain nor our evaluation of its intensity. In short, Devine provides no good reason for thinking that animal suffering is less intense than human suffering.

That Devine has not provided good reason for making light of animal suffering in comparison to human suffering is a devastating comment on his view of the utilitarian justification of vegetarianism. But no less devastating is his failure to take the utilitarian defense seriously enough to check out the human side of the utilitarian calculation. Even if animal suffering were less intense than human suffering, the utilitarian would still need to know whether there was enough human pleasure derived from the taste of meat to outweigh the requisite animal suffering.

The human abilities to verbalize and conceptualize often, in fact, prevent us from appreciating sensations as they present themselves to us. This fact, the fact of inattention to immediate sensation, suggests that humans typically do not enjoy tastes to any great intensity, which is <u>the critical experience</u> on the human side of the utilitarian calculation. On the animal side of the calculation it is even worse: animals have no complex conceptual mechanisms to distract them from the painful sensations they experience while they are caged, prodded and slaughtered. It is very dubious, for example, to think that a family at MacDonald's experiences so much pleasure from eating their hamburger in such a distracting environment that this pleasure overcomes even a fraction of the frustration, pain and terror that the cow had to undergo in order wind up on a sesame seed bun.

This observation may suggest that whatever pleasures humans experience due to eating meat is to be compared with whatever suffering animals undergo. But that is not the crucial utilitarian calculation. Rather, the utilitarian is only interested in the amount of pleasure which would only occur were we to eat meat and which would not occur were we to eat tasty vegetables instead. That is the amount of pleasure which is a consequence of eating meat (as opposed to eating in general). Since much of the world's population finds that vegetarian meals can be delightfully tasty, there is good reason for thinking that the pleasures which people derive from eating meat can be completely, or nearly completely, replaced with pleasures from eating vegetables. Hence, animal suffering would have to be so unintense as to leave the animals nearly indifferent in order for the utilitarian calculation to permit the eating of meat. Since this is false, utilitaraianism prohibits the eating of meat and provides a solid moral basis for vegetarianism.

Devine concludes his fable trying to defend and justify a moral principle for treating nonhuman animals differently because they are not humans (498-504). His apology for speciesism is the following: "anthropocentricity of some sort cannot be avoided. Morality is a human phenomenon, and the moral words are words in human language" (504). But Devine overlooks the vast difference between (1) being a member of the human species, and so being unable to avoid using human language; and (2) being a human speciesist, and so using human language to attempt to justify treating nonhumans differently simply because they are nonhumans. Although it is true that we cannot help being members of the human species, we can stop being speciesists, and carefully evaluating the relevant arguments may help.

Like many fables, Devine's fable about ethics and animals provides us with a moral: being philosophical about animals involves more than just rationalizing a set of conventional beliefs, whereas acting morally toward animals, at least if one is a utilitarian, involves being a vegetarian.

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[1]One could maintain that having an emotion requires making an assessment which is (a) conceptual in nature and (b) beyond the scope of animals. But, as William Alston points out, (a) is highly controversial, and to assume such a view as true would be to beg a highly controversial question in the philosophy of mind (see "Emotions and Feelings," Encyclopedia of Philosophy (1967), pp. 479-486). But even if (a) were true, to assume, in addition, that (b) is true would be to bet a central question about animals.

[2]For such evidence see In the Shadow of Man (1971), Jane van Lawick-Goodall, pp. 225-229; Among the Elephants (1975), Iain and Oria Douglas-Hamilton; and The Lure of the Dolphins (1979); pp. 144-145 and 24-26.